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ABSTRACT

Literatures created by American Indians illustrate the positive potential that expanding the literary canon has for helping to achieve a more democratic classroom. Expanding the idea of what constitutes a text worthy of study enhances students' degree of involvement in and sense of connection to curriculum content and helps them become better equipped to participate in democratic processes. Affording students meaningful reading experiences in response to a broadened, more extensive and inclusive set of reading choices increases the probability of their participation and involvement. Three recent young adult novels by American Indian authors include such culturally specific themes as: prejudice and discrimination toward Indians; hopelessness regarding the Indian situation; mixed-blood ancestry; alienation from non-Indian peers; Indian/non Indian friendships; and capturing/recapturing tribal identity, spirituality, and traditions. Through exposure to the experiences of American Indians (and by extension, those of members of other racial and ethnic minority groups, as well as women), students gain a more complete understanding of the diversity of America. (RS)

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# The Democracy of Inclusion: American Indian Literatures in the English Language Arts Classroom

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"The Democracy of Inclusion: American Indian Literatures in the English Language Arts Classroom"

Introduction

Today, I would like for us to consider the relationship between democracy (the theme of this year's conference) and the literary experiences through which we guide our students in English class. As part of this consideration, I will argue that expanding the literary canon and expanding opportunities for student response to literature make our English classrooms more democratic. I will cite specific examples of literatures created by American Indians to illustrate the positive potential that expanding the literary canon has for helping to achieve a more democratic classroom.

A Definition

Ernest E. Bayles provides an operational definition of "democracy," one that connects the concept directly to education and one that ties democracy to action and experience. According to Bayles (1960), "[D]emocracy should be defined as equality of opportunity to participate in making group decisions and equality of opportunity to abide by them" (157). Related more directly to what English teachers do, the definition implies development of a curriculum mutually relevant to teachers and students as well as the freedom to respond to curriculum content in meaningful ways.

Throughout American history, the connection between education and democracy has been described and analyzed. Thomas Jefferson saw the need for education of the American citizenry.

> ...[He] found in 'the diffusion of knowledge' the best guarantee of the public liberties essential for the republican way of life. This was because education could prevent 'tyranny over the mind of man' by reducing ignorance, allaying superstition, and loosening the bonds of external

controls (Green, 1988, 28-29).

Horace Mann's "common schools" made education accessible to more Americans and assured them of some equity of educational experience through the development of a common curriculum. John Dewey argued the need to make education relevant, to connect education directly to knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to contribute to society, to participate in democratic processes. According to Dewey ([1916, 1944] 1966):

> A society which makes provisions for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is...democratic. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships...and the habits of mind which secure social changes without inducing disorder (99).

Consistently, it has been made clear that education plays an essential role in the maintenance and continued development of American democracy. I say "American" democracy because our nation's democratic experience is unique. To the notion of "rule by the people" Americans add the concepts of freedom and equality. In THE DIALECTIC OF FREEDOM (1988), Maxine Green states,

> If we are seriously interested in education for freedom...it is... important to find a way of developing a praxis of educational consequence that opens the spaces necessary for the remaking of a democratic community. For this to happen...[i]t would mean fresh and sometimes startling winds blowing through the classrooms of the nation. It would mean the granting of audibility to numerous voices seldom heard before, and, at once, an involvement with all sorts of young people being provoked to...make their own the multilinguality needed for structuring

of contemporary experience and thematizing lived worlds" (126-127). The voices Green alludes to include not only those of our students who seldom are granted opportunites to respond, in any personally genuine sense, to what they have read, but also the voices of authors, theorists, and teachers from groups ignored or marginalized in the literary curriculum, typically members of racial and ethnic minority groups and women. These writers and others working in the area of response-centered literary criticism help clarify and describe how English teachers can democratize--that is, make more free and more equal--the education of their students. Expanding the idea of what constitutes a text worthy of study enhances students' degree of involvement in and sense of connection to curriculum content and helps them become better equipped to participate in democratic processes.

Expanding the Canon, Expanding Democracy

When we widen the range of curriculum choices for our students, especially as it relates to literature, we make our classrooms more democratic. Expanding the literary canon "grants audibility to voices seldom heard before" as Maxine Green put it. Readable texts should include not only time-tested classics and those works deemed necessary by some to be "culturally literate," but also thematically relevant materials, students' own writing, and the writings of a diverse and representative sample of male and female authors from various racial and ethnic groups comprising the American population. As Louise Rosenblatt ([1938] 1983) explains,

> Many writers have given sensitive expression to the problems of...immigrant[s], in [their] adjustments both to [their] new environment and to the cultural gap between [themselves] and [their] Americanized children. Even the great body of regional literature makes vivid the hetereogeneous and complex nature of America. Or again, many recent works express the strains and stresses of our

> society and the plight of minority groups. There is the recurrent theme of aspiration toward an ever more democratic and humane way of life. Works such as these can aid the student in understanding the nature of the past out of which the society has grown and in becoming aware of the forces at work in it today (270).

Given the physical, emotional, and cognitive characteristics of our students, YA literature, in particular, has the potential to more fully involve them in reading and responding, in coming to better understand the participatory nature of democracy. In describing the need for literature and students to connect in order for meaningful literacy education to take place, Robert Probst (in Shuman, 1993) argues that "[t]here ought to be some correlation between what students go through as they grow up and what great writers have written about" (32). And according to R. Baird Shuman (1993), "Schools serve students best when they begin by attending to the immediate concerns of their students. As students' needs are met, the scope of their interests will increase and their true innate abilities will surface and blossom (32).

Affording our students meaningful reading experiences in response to a broadened, more extensive and inclusive set of reading choices increases the probability of their participation and involvement. This broadening and inclusivity strikes at the heart of education for democracy. Again, according to Maxine Green (1988),

> "Recent discoveries of women's novels, like discoveries of black [and by extention *other minority* ] literature, have certainly affected the vision of those reared in the traditions of so-called 'great' literature, as they have the constricted visions of those still confined by outmoded ideas of gender. The growing ability to look at even classical works through

> new critical lenses has enabled numerous readers, of both genders, to apprehend previously unknown renderings of their lived worlds. Not only have many begun coming to literature with the intent of *achieving* it as meaningful through realization by means of perceptival readings[,] [m]any have begun...viewing literary texts as spaces where multiple voices and multiple discourses intersect and interact" (129).

As a function of the "canon wars," expanding the literary canon, according to Schlesinger and D'Sousa, pits "Truth" (with a capital "T") against what they label "special interests." James Banks (1994) and other multiculturalists argue that expanding the canon enhances American democracy. Banks explains:

> [T]he aim of [reform] movements is not to push for special interests but to reform the curriculum so that it will be more truthful, more inclusive, and reflect the...experiences of the diverse groups and cultures that make up U. S. society. Rather than being special interest reform movements, they contribute to the democratization of the school...curriculum. They contribute to the public good (23).

Expanding Student Participation, Expanding Democracy

Once the range of reading options is expanded, we must turn our attention to creating a classroom climate that fosters free response to literature. It is then that we assure greater degrees of participation, autonomy, and equity of experience among our students. Our students become increasingly more comfortable as they participate in class by responding to what they read. Once an atmosphere of free response exists, we urge our students to consider not only their own, but also the responses of their peers. English teachers then guide and hone students' responses, emphasizing points of similarity and points of difference between the various responses (Purves, Rogers and Soter, 1990, 56).

Case in Point: American Indian Literature

When we teach works by American Indian authors (and authors from other minority communities, as well), we make English class more democratic. Through the inclusion of the literature of American Indians, English teachers validate American Indian students' experiences, cultures, and world views. Non-Indian students are exposed to experiences, cultures and world views that differ from their own. Teachers expand the potential for student response as students examine both the commonalities and differences of experience between themselves and the protagonists in the literature. Carol Markstrom-Adams (1990) describes aspects of adolescence common across cultures such as extreme self-consciousness, individuation from family, and achieving a sense of self. She also posits aspects of adolescence unique to American Indians, features she calls "cultural specific" literary themes. These include prejudice and discrimination toward Indians, hopelessness regarding the Indian situation, mixed-blood ancestry, alienation from non-Indian peers, Indian/non-Indian friendships, and capturing/recapturing tribal identity, sprirituality and traditions. As specific examples, I would like to show how these themes are present in three recent YA novels by American Indian authors and to suggest reasons why studying these and other works of American Indian literature contributes to the creation of a more democratic English classroom.

In Virginia Sneve's novel When Thunders Spoke (Sneve, 1974) Norman Two Bull encounters the hostility of a white shopkeeper and the somewhat more subtle racism of a white minister. With the help of his father and grandfather, he is able to confront anti-Indian racism and to better understand himself as a result. Norman learns to value the wisdom of the ways of the Lakota as espoused by his grandfather, Matt. At the same time, Norman, like most young adolescents, matures and comes to more fully understand himself. Through the influence of his grandfather, he moves toward knowledge of traditonal Lakota ways. He gains

greater self-awareness and a more secure sense of himself as he is forced to confront differences between himself and a non-Indian shopkeeper who sees the world in terms of profit and materialism. He reconciles the identity conflict within him as he confronts his mother, a converted Christian, and decides to honor traditional Lakota spiritual and familial values. Non-Indian adolescents can relate directly to the antagonism between Norman and his mother. He rejects her attempt to mold his spirituality , but realizes he can continue to love her.

Janet Campbell Hale's The Owl's Song ([1974] 1991), depicts Billy White Hawk as an adolescent involved in a search for self. In the tradition of the *bildungsroman*, he sets out on a journey. His identity confusion leads him from the reservation in Idaho to a big city in California. Operating as a symbol of an empty and oppressive non-Indian culture, the city--to include its people, its schools, its concrete and steel--further alienates Billy. It is only after he rediscovers his Indian roots, after he is able to hear the owl's song, that he develops a positive sense of self and a hopeful view of his potential as a person.

> He loved these Benewah hills, this place where the people of his tribe first came into being when the earth was very young. It was, as Waluwetsu had said, that there was no way of staying and living any more. Still, all this would remain with him when he went away and would not change. He was the son of Sah-hult-sum, the grandson of White Hawk, the tribe's last shaman. He heard singing begin and he looked all around him and could see no one. The singing became stronger and he realized it came from deep within his being.... It was all right, now. It was all right (Hale, 1991, 152-153).

Billy reconciles his internal conflict through an emotional, physical, and spiritual return to his people's ancestral homeland. In the process he rejects superficiality, materialism, and racism. Non-Indian students can benefit from

reflection upon their own heritages and personal familial experiences. They grow from the knowledge that solutions to problems of identity often lie in turning inward toward one's own cultural heritage.

And finally Michael Dorris deals with the themes of individual identity and family relationships in Morning Girl (1992) as the dual-voiced narrative depicts the love and rivalry of adolescent siblings. Like many of our students, the Indian protagonists of this novel, Morning Girl and her brother Star Boy, struggle to understand the physical upheaval and emotional storm and stress through which they suffer. The resolution of Morning Girl's and Star Boy's internal and relational conflicts lies, not only in their growth and maturation, but also in aspects of Indian culture--in the comfort provided by their grandparents, in the example set by their parents, and in the solace they find through living harmoniously with world around them.

> My brother stopped where he was. His hands were filled with food he couldn't drop and waste. There was fresh honey smeared on his chin. He closed his eyes, then opened them. He looked at me. I don't know how long we stood that way, but it was as if just the two of us were there. I was aware of the sound of babies, of waves, of the birds as they flapped their wings above the food, but I heard them through deep water. Star Boy and I reached across the space between us, we made a fishing line with our eyes and each pulled the other to the center (Dorris, 1992, 50-51).

Non-Indian students will find direct parallels between their own internal doubts, parental conflicts, sibling rivalries, and family experiences and those depicted by Dorris.

The points of connection, of commonality and contrast, between the experiences described in American Indian literatures and those of non-Indian students serve

at once as both bridges between the cultures and mirrors reflecting aspects of the universal human condition.

Conclusion

Through exposure to the experiences of American Indians (and by extension, those of members of other racial and ethnic minority groups as well as women) our students gain a more complete understanding of the diversity of America. Points of difference and conflict emerge. As clearly depicted in their literatures, American Indians have been victimized by racism. Their philosophical and spiritual orientations differ from those of non-Indians. Our students, however, through discussion and clarification of such differences, can achieve greater understanding. Perhaps more importantly, through the experience of reading and responding to a broader and more diverse array of literary choices, our students uncover shared experiences which serve as points of connection between themselves and members of an array of cultures. These common experiences, like mortar, fill gaps between our students, and bind them in relationships, based not on ignorance and fear, but rather on understanding. These shared points of connection create more democratic English Language Arts classrooms.

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